

# the *Escapist*

## The Conquest of Origin

**Origin** created worlds.

**EA** shipped games.

**EA** won.

by Allen Varney

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Over the last week, I received several Letters to the Editor regarding the games mentioned in our last issue, particularly Chief Economist. I agree, it sounds like a great game. Alas, it is not real – a figment of Mark Wallace's imagination. Our last issue's theme, and title, was "Why Haven't They Made This?" And the response from our readers shows that perhaps our writers were onto something. Maybe someone should make Chief Economist. I'd be happy to pass developers or publishers along to Mark Wallace for further discussion, should any desire.

Speaking of developers and publishers, we have arrived at the topic of this week's issue. One developer and publisher in particular, The Big One: EA. We have not highlighted an individual company before, so we thought it best to start at the top, the biggest of our growing industry.

Now before everyone gets upset and starts shouting, "Brown-nosing!" or "Not another rant!" give us a chance. We

asked our writers to give us a well-rounded, fresh look at EA and they did not disappoint. Allen Varney spoke with employees of Origin Systems all the way to the top – the very top – and came back with "The Conquest of Origin." Mark Wallace proffers the example of United Artists as a possible parallel for EA's growth over the years in "Unrisky Business." Jason Smith gives us a look at EA back when they were Electronic Arts, idealism and all, in "Setting the Stage." Find these articles and more in this week's issue of The Escapist.

Enjoy!



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**To the Editor:** I agree with almost all of John Tynes' article, "Feature Creep." However, it's a shame that John Tynes rejects the Revolution out of hand because of its controller because it will be exactly what he is looking for. Nintendo has shown time and time again that it will make fun games with an easy learning curve.

**-Jeff Liu**

**To the Editor:** I'm stunned about the game Chief Economist mentioned in The Escapist 13 ("Capitalism is teh suxx0r!!111!"), but I'm unable to find the game on the net.

This made me realize an issue in The Escapist: most of the time there are no "related links" to the topics you're talking about (ie: there's no link to introversion's website or the uplink website in the uplink article).

I, as being a lazy ass, thus request the following:

a) A link to the Chief Economist website, as I'm unable to find it.

b) A small section for each article containing relevant links (ie: link to the game homepage at last)

Huge thanks in advance.

**-Florian Hufsky**



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**To the Editor:** I'd say my previous reply was rushed. For one, I am sure I'm subconsciously affected by advertising, that being one of its main benefits in TV and magazines. And perhaps it was sensationalist, and sounded unreasonable. Nevertheless, there is a good reason why the advertising seemed so annoying, and that is the lack of context sensitivity.

The Wall Street Journal is read by many thousands of people, and costs next to nothing, and so a wide range of adverts are appropriate. A physically published gaming magazine might be read by one thousand, and the price ensures only gamers will be affected to any degree, and so gaming adverts are the most sensible choice.

The Escapist is read by relatively few, and the target audience are those who enjoy games without the constant market pressure of the mainstream. Is it really fair then to expose these gaming recluse to the exact corporate standard which may alienate them from Official Playstation Magazine, or any EA game

sporting those oh-so-long string of adverts at startup?

I'd also just like to re-iterate that, despite what Andy from last week may think, advertising does not a good magazine make. In fact, a picture of a pint of beer will likely not affect the content of the article it is shoehorned into in any tangible way. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a sudden craving for a Carlsberg.

**-Doug Inman**

**To the Editor:** In regards to SMAC (and gaming in general) I'm reminded of the malleable triusm, "Simple minds think of people, average minds think of events, great minds think of ideas." Never before in a game has there been such a confluence of Great Ideas - technological and spiritual determinism, the Will to Power, near-pornographic fetishism of Progress; the list goes on and on. When a game erupts onto the scene with the authority of (at least) a century of concepts behind it, it can't fail to enthrall the true science fiction dork.

That gaming opens us to the full spectrum of human expression is to be applauded. Unfortunately the simple interactions seem to be crowding out the great ones.

Thanks for the article and the magazine in general. Looking forward to more,

**-Ben Warr**

**To the Editor:** Today was my second time reading an article from The Escapist (linked from Shacknews.com) and I again I found it very enjoyable. The Escapist provides a mature and thought provoking commentary on gaming that I find lacking from other publications. Particularly the articles on MMOG economies and feature creep have been very good reads. I look forward to reading more in the future.

**-Ryan**



## The Conquest Of Origin

**Origin created worlds. EA shipped games. EA won.**

by Allen Varney

**"Trip Hawkins is the Antichrist."**

The scene: a bar at a gaming convention in the late 1980s. The speaker: an executive at the computer game company Origin who today, no doubt, would prefer to remain anonymous.

Why the holy-fire view of William M. Hawkins III, founder of Electronic Arts? Because (as this exec explained) EA meant to win in the computer game business not only by making good games, but by preventing competitors from making good games too - by actively interfering with their ability to do business. As one example, EA had filed a frivolous lawsuit against Origin. Forced into a costly out-of-court settlement, Origin execs asked Trip Hawkins why he had allowed the suit; he responded, "This is just business. This is the way we're going to win."



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Furthermore, EA was all about marketing. For Hawkins the question was never, "How good is this game?" It was always, "How can we sell this?" To high-minded execs at Origin - makers of the *Ultima* and *Wing Commander* series, the high priests of the high end, who valued commitment to an artistic vision - this attitude was sacrilege.

*Ultima* designer and Origin co-founder Richard "Lord British" Garriott even worked an EA reference into *Ultima VII* (1992). Two high-profile nonplayer characters, Elizabeth and Abraham, perform seemingly helpful tasks for the player - but E. and A. turn out to be murderers in league with the player's nemesis, the Guardian. The three items that power the Guardian's evil generators are a cube, a sphere and a tetrahedron - the former EA logo.

This reference in *Ultima VII* proved prophetic. In 1991 Hawkins left EA to found the short-lived 3DO Company. The next year, 1992, Origin entered dire financial straits and sold out to EA. Yet Origin never sold its soul; rather, EA spent the next 12 years gradually and painfully devouring it. The sad story

could be a case study for future MBA students.

Why did Origin sell? It was partly due - brace yourself - to the price of floppy disks.

## Changing the World

Founded in 1983, Origin was a creature of the dawn. Garriott had already gotten rich in high school, from a game he coded in BASIC in his bedroom and sold in a ziplock bag. Founding Origin with \$70,000 in family money, he and his brother Robert created a culture that prized creative vision and expansive, thoroughly developed game settings. The company later took the slogan "We create worlds."

Origin project director Stephen Beeman recalls, "Origin's cardinal virtue was its commitment to do whatever it took to ship the director's vision. We had a motto for it: 'A game's only late until it ships, but it sucks forever.' If the game's creative vision demanded a megabyte of graphics, and the only way to load that into memory was to write our own operating system -" (the dubious "voodoo memory" scheme Origin created in 1992 for *Ultima VII: The Black Gate*)



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"- well, that's what we did, and damn the risk to the schedule or the consequences to the budget, not to mention the programmers' lives."

In recent years, Electronic Arts has taken heat for its sweatshop working conditions, but marathon crunches were a fact of life at Origin long before the purchase. Project teams endorsed Beeman's doctrine: "Sleep is for the weak."

Producer Warren Spector worked at Origin from 1989 to 1996. "I always felt we were genuinely trying to change the world," he says. "There was a feeling of creating something new, of being on the cutting edge; that was incredibly exciting. That, more than anything else, drove people to do exceptional work."

Employees treated each game as a learning experience. Richard Garriott made it a point of pride to start each new *Ultima* entirely from scratch, with not a line of code carried over from earlier games. Even the map editors and other tools were coded anew.

Beeman says, "We started with the vision of what we wanted the game to be

## Employees treated each game as a learning experience.

- a vision generally inspired by our love of film - then busted our asses to figure out a way to pull that off. By contrast, companies like LucasArts or id started with an idea of what it was possible to do, then crafted killer gameplay around that. When our creative vision turned out to be achievable in a reasonable time (as with *Wing Commander I* and *II*), we hit home runs. When the creative vision turned out not to be achievable, development dragged on until the next year (or beyond), when improvements to the hardware made it achievable."

The problem was, creating worlds took a lot of disk space.

### Seventy Cents Times Eighty Zillion

By 1992, Origin faced a cash shortfall caused by factors almost entirely outside its control.

Origin was a publisher, which meant manufacturing boxes and stocking them in the retail channel. In that primeval pre-*Myst* era, computer games shipped not on CD-ROMs but on 3.5-inch, 1.44-

megabyte high-density floppy disks. Origin games, in particular, required lots of disks - often eight to ten disks that cost about 70 cents apiece. Cost of goods became such an issue that while *Strike Commander* was in development, the team jokingly suggested shipping the game pre-installed on its own 20MB hard drive. (*Strike* shipped on eight floppies in 1993, but CD-ROMs finally became commonplace in time for a later expanded edition.) *Wing Commander* was a huge, unanticipated success, and the high cost of manufacturing it consumed all the company's ready cash and more.

In a single year Origin's payroll skyrocketed. Prior to *Wing Commander* and *Ultima VI*, Origin games were created by a programmer or two, with some contract art and writing. *Wing*

*Commander* had five core team members; *Wing Commander II* suddenly had **25**. Star designer Chris Roberts, among others, drew a substantial salary.

While Origin's cash reserves were tapped harder than ever, the Apple and Commodore 64 platforms collapsed, taking with them many small retailers. Origin not only lost the sales of its Apple and C64 back inventory, but it suddenly had to eat bad debt from failed companies in the channel. Worse, Richard Garriott had chosen to develop new projects first on the Apple platform rather than the technically inferior IBM PC - "a horrific mistake," he now says. Retooling the pipeline would take six months.

Normally in this situation - high short-term expenses, but higher long-term potential - a company borrows money. But as bad luck would have it, at that time there was no money in Origin's home state, Texas. The savings-and-loan

**Wing Commander was a huge, unanticipated success, and the high cost of manufacturing it consumed all the company's ready cash and more.**

industry had collapsed following a real-estate bubble. With half the state's financial institutions unable to lend money, banks could ignore small businesses in favor of big, safe corporations. Just a year or two later, this crisis passed, but Origin got caught at just the wrong time.

As the Garriotts dipped into their own savings to make payroll, they contemplated options. Richard says, "Ultimately we chose EA because EA's vision for the future, their prediction of platform shifts, and their planning to meet that challenge was right on."

And, too, Trip Hawkins had left EA. "Had Trip still been there, there's no way we would have gone with EA," said an Origin staffer involved in the deal.

## Starting Out Fine

Origin's employees on the early years after the purchase:

**Spector:** "For the first couple of years, EA's acquisition of Origin changed the place for the better in nearly every way. EA brought some much needed structure to our product greenlight and development processes. And we certainly

got bigger budgets! We were able to do more and cooler things than we'd been able to do before. In most ways, though, EA gave us a lot of rope - enough to hang ourselves, as it turned out!"

**Garriott:** "We doubled the size of the company from 200 to 400 that first year. We went from 5-10 projects to 10-20, and staffed those projects almost entirely with inexperienced people. It won't surprise you to learn those projects were not well managed. That was totally Origin's fault. We failed, and we ended up killing half of those products. That's probably what set up the EA mentality that 'Origin is a bunch of [deleted],' pardon my French."

**Spector:** "Once it became apparent we were getting a little crazy, EA started taking a firmer hand with us, integrating us into the machine in subtle and not so subtle ways, and that's when things started to get a little less pleasant. Every company has its politics but, in my relatively limited experience, EA was an incredibly political place - lots of empire building, folks jockeying for bigger, better jobs, competing for resources, marketing dollars and so on. And there were certainly people at EA who, let's

**"In most ways, though, EA gave us a lot of rope - enough to hang ourselves, as it turned out!"**

just say, lacked confidence in Origin's development management and - less sensibly, I think - in the Austin development community in general. There were a lot of strange decisions."

**Denis Loubet,** artist: "Before [the purchase], the desire to keep Origin afloat did much to keep politics on the back burner. But afterwards, survival transformed into a competition at the feeding trough. As production groups became more insular, Origin fractured. That was the death of any 'Origin Culture.' It didn't help that each production head was a dictator over his team, yet each had to brown-nose EA for funding."

**Steve Powers,** artist and programmer: "When EA assumed control, much of the joy began to fade from the Origin company culture. It was a running joke through the company that we went from





working for the Rebellion to working for the Empire. Our company had a culture that made work an incredible joy, day in and day out, even though we worked tremendously long hours. And the culture **had** to be appealing, because Origin paid a pittance. I started there at wages that were just above poverty level. EA began to bring salaries up to a competitive level for the region, and people who were equivalent to hobbyists were suddenly in a career. It was no longer a nerdy fraternity; it was business.”

**Garriott:** “There are people at EA to this day who I respect either as brilliant or at least well-intentioned. [CEO] Larry Probst was often not supportive of the things I was doing, but I respect Larry because he was always clear, rational and consistent in his lack of support. I felt [Chief Creative Officer] Bing Gordon understood sometimes; I always felt Bing’s intent was to help me do my best. Nancy Smith [Executive VP, North American Publishing] empathized and desired success for all at Origin. [But] there were others who got into politics, who very clearly would get into the mode of ‘Your success will work against my success. EA caring about you will

mean they care less about me.’ The politicians began to look at us as the enemy, and would actively work against us.”

## **The Hatchet**

After EA bought Origin, authority for the new division fell to the president of EA Worldwide Studios, Don Mattrick.

A Canadian from the Vancouver suburb of Burnaby, Mattrick wasn’t just a suit; he could claim seniority over many Origin coders, having programmed (with Jeff Sember) his first published game, *Evolution* for the Apple II, in 1982 at age 17. Mattrick joined EA in 1991 when EA paid him \$13 million for his company, Distinctive Software, maker of edutainment and sports games such as the *Test Drive* and *HardBall* series. Distinctive became EA Canada, and as its Executive VP and General Manager, Mattrick led it brilliantly from strength to strength until 1997, when EA CEO Lawrence Probst III promoted him to Worldwide.

Once EA started exerting a tighter grip on Origin, Mattrick pushed teams to stay on schedule (an insistence that badly damaged *Ultima VIII*, according to

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Garriott). Mattrick killed many projects because they had spun out of control, and cancelled other projects for reasons staffers still consider mysterious. Some staffers believe (though not for attribution) Mattrick undermined Origin because it competed for resources with Distinctive's new incarnation, EA Canada. This view arose particularly because of the way Mattrick managed Origin's late-'90s move into online games.

This move was not his idea. Originally there was no money in the Origin budget for *Ultima Online*. Garriott went directly to Probst to ask for \$150K in seed money to kick off the project. Without Probst's approval, *UO* would have been delayed, maybe never started at all. Garriott said in a 2004 GameSpy interview, "*Ultima Online* was kind of a red-headed stepchild during development. Everyone at EA was focused on *Ultima IX*, which was seen as more of a sure thing. Nobody at EA really understood what *Ultima Online* was all about." But after the beta test drew 50,000 volunteers, EA made a sharp reversal. They insisted Garriott shelve *Ultima IX* and work only on *UO*.

Launched in 1997, *UO*'s unheralded success (it peaked at about 250,000 subscribers) kicked off the MMORPG industry and roused EA's interest in online games. Origin presented EA a suite of ideas for followups: a Flash Gordon-style space opera, a martial arts game using collectible electronic cards, online soccer and more. None of the proposals were sequels, spinoffs or licenses.

But EA, which sold sports and licensed games by the millions, was used to releasing sequels every year. The corporate office commissioned *Wing Commander Online*, *Privateer Online* (based on the 1993 space sim), and the licensed *Harry Potter Online*. And, inevitably, *Ultima Online 2*, which the marketing department retitled *Ultima Worlds Online: Origin*.

Staffers argued against doing *UO2*, because it would compete with *UO*. But Mattrick greenlighted it in 1999, cancelled *Wing Commander Online* and assigned its team to *UO2*. A bunch of guys who liked spaceships, reassigned to animate monsters? They quit six months

later, and *UO2* had to start over. The game never really recovered.

In March 2001 Mattrick cancelled *UO2*. Among his reasons: *UO2* would compete with the original *UO*. (EA repeated this story precisely with *Ultima X: Odyssey*, greenlighted 2002, cancelled 2004.)

## Business Matters

*Privateer Online*: cancelled in 2000 to avoid competition with EA's big bet, *Earth and Beyond*. The core *PO* team moved to Verant (later Sony Online Entertainment) and created *Star Wars Galaxies*.

*Harry Potter Online*, cancelled at Origin 2001, assigned as *Hogwarts Online* to EA studio New Pencil, cancelled 2005.

*Transland* (a surrealist game), *Silverheart* (an RPG with design contributions from Michael Moorcock), *Firehorse* (Hong Kong John Woo-style full motion video), mainstream RTS *Technosaur* : cancelled, cancelled, cancelled....





"The business was changing radically, in ways an independent developer/publisher like Origin probably wasn't equipped to handle," says Spector. "We were becoming a blockbuster business, like the movies. When Origin's revenue and profits took a hit and EA gave us a very... aggressive budget number to hit, it was mostly my projects that got killed - I wasn't happy about that. But what were they going to do? Kill Richard Garriott projects? Chris Roberts projects?"

Spector's games (*Ultima VII Part 2: Serpent Isle*, *Ultima Underworld*, *System Shock* and many more) consistently brought returns a small studio would think quite respectable. But the economics of a billion-dollar corporation are different. For EA it makes more sense to reach for the sky with every single project. The games that die or get cancelled become tax writeoffs, and the rare hit pays for all the rest. The worst case is the mere modest success, a mediocre return on equity without corresponding tax advantages.

Spector says, "Mattrick told me I needed to make games more like Richard and Chris - swing for the fences, go for the

megahit, spend a ton to make a ton - instead of consistently turning out smaller games, making some money every year. I thought he was nuts at the time. Took me several more years to admit that, like it or not, he was right and I was wrong."

The forces that propelled Electronic Arts to success and gave it the funds to purchase Origin - the incessant marketing, the quest for blockbusters, even the ferocious executive infighting - also made it difficult to exploit Origin effectively. EA could have preserved Origin as a small design house gestating new ideas. Rather than alienating staffers and discarding the valuable *Ultima* and *Wing Commander* brands, EA could have kept Origin alive in body and spirit, just as it could have preserved the other studios it bought: Westwood and Bullfrog and Maxis and...

But though this was technically possible, it was not imaginable. Like any huge company, EA is risk-averse. The company has every incentive to play it safe and do a competent job on *Madden 2009* or *Tiger Woods 2017*.



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A *New York Times* article on EA (August 8, 2005), "Relying on Video Game Sequels," observes, "Electronic Arts plans to release 26 new games [in 2005], all but one of them a sequel, including the 16th version of *NHL Hockey*, the 11th of the racing game *Need for Speed* and the 13th of the *PGA Tour* golf game." In the article CEO Probst said sequels appeal to Wall Street investors because they have a steady following among consumers. "He added that the company had a goal of putting out at least one entirely new game every year, and had several major original games in its pipeline." Blogger Bill Harris observed, "A 'goal' of one new game a year? Damn, Larry, don't be so crazy ambitious. Remember Icarus."

Beeman says, "You'd like to think a marriage of EA and Origin would result in a merger of their strengths. But instead of combining EA's execution with Origin's creativity, the end result was more like Origin's execution with EA's creativity. EA limited Origin's selection of projects to sequels or other 'proven' ideas, then let Origin run wild. I think this was pretty much the introduction of that meme into the industry, but clearly we still see it today."

"I still think it was possible to make it work," Garriott says now, "except no one made time to make it work, and there were evil elements in the company."

## Red Dots

In 1992 Steve Powers found in a Marketing department trashcan a group photo of the entire company. "It was taken on the steps of the Wild Basin building during the *Ultima VII* ship party," Powers recalls. "I scanned it and used it as my Windows wallpaper for years. One by one, as people left or were fired, I Photoshopped a red dot over them, blotting them out of the scene. Most of the dots tended to come in clusters around Christmas. Just before Christmas 1997, I dotted my own face



and left. For years I kept the image updated while working for other game studios, and it wasn't until fairly recently that the last face got erased."

Some notable dots:

*Wing Commander* designer Chris Roberts left Origin in 1996 to found the game company Digital Anvil. Roberts wrote and directed the 1999 *Wing Commander* movie (Rotten Tomatoes score: 7%). He released the space game *Freelancer* in 2003 to modest success, then left Digital Anvil to found Point of No Return Entertainment. So far the name appears apt.

Warren Spector left Origin in 1996 to work for Looking Glass, then run ION Storm Austin. In 2000 he produced the bestselling game, *Deus Ex*. The genesis of *DX* was an Origin project called *Shooter*, which EA cancelled shortly before his departure. "*DX* could have been an EA title!" Spector says.

Artist Denis Loubet left Origin in 1997 and is now a partner in Iron Will Games, which runs the boutique MMOG *Ashen Empires*. One of the designers once described it conceptually as "*Ultima V* for 10,000 players."

In 1998, Don Mattrick opened a \$54 million EA Canada development studio in Burnaby. By 2003 it had 700 employees, and Mattrick made plans to add another building. The studio currently produces sports games such as *NBA Live*, *Triple Play Baseball*, *NHL Hockey*, and *FIFA Soccer*, the best-selling sports game in the world. "Don Mattrick is a champion of the [British Columbia] high-tech industry," said studio president Sydney Williams in a 2000 interview. Last month, in a move that stunned the industry, Mattrick, the heir apparent to Larry Probst, left Electronic Arts after 23 years with the company "to seek other opportunities." EA gave no reason for his departure.

In 1999, four years after *Ultima VIII*, after colossal labor and at least two complete restarts, Origin released the disappointing *Ultima IX*. No one at the time realized this would be Origin's last new game. Richard Garriott soon left Origin and founded Destination Games (get it?), hiring most of the *Ultima IX* team EA laid off. In 2001, Destination metamorphosed into the American branch of Korean online gaming giant NCSoft. NCSoft Austin has published *City of Heroes* and *Guild Wars*, and is now

struggling through Year Four of a projected three-year development cycle on Garriott's new MMORPG (working title: *Tabula Rasa*).

EA finally shut down Origin in 2004 and relocated *UO* to their California studio. The last employee fired was producer Jeff Hillhouse, Richard Garriott's first hire back in 1983. Hillhouse, like many other key Origin employees, now works with Garriott at NCSoft. 📺

*Allen Varney designed the PARANOIA paper-and-dice roleplaying game (2004 edition) and has contributed to computer games from Sony Online, Origin, Interplay, and Looking Glass.*





## Setting the Stage

### How EA shaped the modern gaming industry

by Jason Smith

In 1982, computer games were still sold in plastic bags.

Trip Hawkins, a newly-minted millionaire after his time at Apple, wanted to change that. He wanted to give developers more credit for their work, and at the time, any credit at all would be more than most. Just as United Artists was designed with a mission to revolutionize the film industry, Electronic Arts had equally grand ambitions. EA derived not only its name, but it's own mission of revolution, this time in games, from United Artists.

Today, most gamers don't remember a time when Electronic Arts (or as they prefer it now, EA) wasn't an industry leader. Over time, the company has, ironically, come to represent all the worst aspects of the gaming industry: endless sequels, licensed







TRIP HAWKINS

derivatives, poor working conditions, and the closure or dismemberment of many beloved studios. This wasn't always the case.

Trip's mission caught the attention of the greatest game designers of the era, and with a phenomenal stable of games for the Atari 800 and Apple II, they took the gaming public by storm. Early EA releases included *M.U.L.E.*, *Archon*, *Hard Hat Mack*, *Pinball Construction Set* and *Dr. J and Larry Bird Go One on One*.

In terms of commercial success, *Hard Hat Mack* was a bestseller, *Archon* was a classic bestseller, and *Pinball Construction Set* was a classic bestseller. It was a really remarkable debut set of products.

#### - Trip Hawkins

#### We See Farther

The initial lineup was just the tip of the iceberg. Over the next few years, EA would attract the best talent in the industry, dominating the marketplace. Attracted by the promise of more respect and more credit for their work, Bill Budge, David Maynard, Jon Freeman and Dan Bunten were among the first to sign on.

This was a rather significant change in the industry. Until this point, game designers were barely credited for their work, if they were even mentioned at all. Atari was particularly notorious in its day, leading to the creation of the first "easter egg": a developer credit in *Adventure*.

More than just credit, developers for early EA products had their names featured prominently on the packaging, and a number of early advertisements and games even featured photographs and interviews with the development team. As a company, early EA was entirely focused on external developers, to the point where they had no internal development teams at all.

That was a very conscious decision on Trip's part to keep a clear separation. EA modeled itself after a record label. The artists were external and on contract, and the internal employees were there to support the artists. Trip never wanted to create a situation where the external artists felt like they were competing for resources with the internal development.

#### - Jeff Johannigman

## Expert Involvement

Even in 1982, the trend toward licensing had already begun, with games based on *Tron* and *Star Wars*, among others, already in existence. But the first time individual sports stars became involved with a video game was EA's *Dr. J and Larry Bird Go One on One*, and it proved to be a landmark development for the company. Not only was it an incredible commercial success at a time when computer games weren't doing exceedingly well, but it paved the way for future titles.

Interestingly enough, and unlike most modern games, the namesakes of these titles were actually heavily involved in the game development process. In the process of developing *One-on-One*, both Julius "Dr. J" Erving and Larry Bird gave pointers to designer Eric Hammond on how to better capture the feel of basketball. Future EA games would expand on this model, with *Chuck Yeager's Advanced Flight Trainer*, *Earl Weaver Baseball* and the now-perennial *John Madden Football*.

These types of titles were another way that EA could reward developers of the day. As a successful company, EA could

negotiate deals like these for their contractors that a purely independent studio couldn't. It was collective bargaining at its finest. For the individual developers, meeting with the expert could be a greater reward than the financial ones.

Yeah, especially in the early days, we had those kind of figures involved in the design process. Back when we did Yeager's advance flight simulator, Ned Lerner was meeting with Chuck Yeager on a fairly regular basis. Ned would sit down with General Yeager, show him the program in development, and let him handle the joystick. General Yeager would tell Ned, "Yeah, this doesn't quite feel right, I think you ought to be doing it this way." And on *Earl Weaver Baseball*, much of the thrill for producer Don Daglow, was in collaborating with Earl Weaver on the design.

- Jeff Johannigman

## Revolutionizing Sales

EA games weren't released in plastic bags. Taking another cue from the music industry, Trip commissioned "album cover" packaging for their products, with custom artwork for each title. The results ended up as unique flat boxes, with







detailed, high quality art, developer credits and game descriptions. This helped the early EA titles stand out among the rest, at least until the rest of the industry followed suit.

I kept track and counted 22 competitors that went to the same printer and used the same album format that we pioneered. However we later had to drop it because with increasingly crowded shelf space the albums got turned sideways ('spined out') and were too thin to see the brands. At that point we began thickening the albums into boxes.

**- Trip Hawkins**

At the same time, EA began to revolutionize the sales and distribution system for games. Up to this point, any company selling software would have their product placed into retail by a general software distributor, who would take a rather significant cut of the sales amount. When Larry Probst arrived at EA in 1984, as VP of Sales, he rapidly grew the sales force and cut out nearly all the distributors, giving EA much higher margins than its contemporaries.

This sales force would have an incredible impact on the industry. Maintaining a distribution channel of this size required more titles than EA was capable of publishing at the time. Their solution was to partner with other developers and publishers to fill in the gaps, as a games-focused distributor themselves. Distribution would be the foundation of EA's initial relationships with Origin Systems, Westwood and Maxis, among others.

### **Aftershocks**

If one were to say that early EA was idealistic, they wouldn't be far from the mark. Certainly, it was a business first and foremost, but like many startups, EA was founded with a mission to change the industry. But with such incredible success, the rapid expansion that comes along with going public, company culture changes. Only as EA's culture changed, it pulled the rest of the industry along in its wake.

The first thing that began to change, even in the early '80s, was the developer promotion. Though it never quite regressed back to the early days of Atari - to this day developers still have credits in the game manuals - the active



## While Hawkins was a developer with a talent for business and marketing, Probst was a salesman with a history at product-oriented companies.

promotion of individual developers has generally faded away. Certain developers, the Sid Meiers and Will Wrights of the world, are still promoted individually, but franchises and brands have long since become the primary focus.

In 1987, EA also began shifting their publishing focus to include internal development. The first such title was *Skate or Die*, but when contracted developers didn't rebel, more projects were begun. Later, projects that were once contract work would be done internally instead, the most notable being *John Madden Football*. This trend was exacerbated in the '90s as EA purchased a number of its former partners, converting them into internal development studios. Today, most EA releases are from these internal studios, and the number of publishers that are not also developers has dropped to nearly none.

In 1991, Trip Hawkins stepped down from his position as CEO, and Larry Probst took the reins of the company. This change of command subtly adjusted the focus of the company: While Hawkins was a developer with a talent for business and marketing, Probst was a salesman with a history at product-oriented companies. The renewed expansionism EA showed in the '90s is just once indicator of the change.

Look at what happened with Steve Jobs and Apple, look at what happened to a dozen other similar successful start-up companies. The person who has the real founding vision and the drive and the ambition to get a small little company off the ground, from zero to several hundred employees, has a particular mindset, a particular drive, particular ambition, a particular ego, and a particular desire to be in control of certain aspects of the business. Once a company gets to a certain size and goes public, those traits make it difficult to grow to the next level. A

larger company needs somebody who is more operationally effective, and less of an entrepreneurial revolutionary. I think Larry Probst is one hundred percent business and sales.

- Jeff Johannigman

### The Human Story

Will EA change, shifting back towards the ideals at which it started? Probably not without a very strong push in the right direction. But the industry is different now, as is the focus on it, and things may change despite them. In late 2004, working conditions at EA were graphically described in an essay EA: The Human Story by an anonymous blogger under the handle ea\_spouse. These sentiments, and their possible outcome, have been echoed by other developers in the industry, including ones once working with EA.


EA will consist of an "officer corp" of project managers and executives and a

**But the industry is different now, as is the focus on it, and things may change despite them.**

whole bunch of cannon fodder, young kids who are eager to make their break into the game industry. They bring 'em in, they work 'em to death and then they bring in someone else. Turnover rate is not important. The organizational structure allows them to function very well with a very high turnover rate.

- Chris Crawford

Spurned by the ea\_spouse's words, or perhaps the similarly inspired (and recently settled) class-action lawsuit, or even the focus of industry groups like the IGDA, a leaked internal memo promised changes. Could EA lead the industry back to greener pastures? I suppose it depends on whether any of that old idealism still survives.

I'd certainly like to see it though. 

*Jason Smith functions as chief technowhatsit for The Escapist, and still remembers his introduction to EA games back on his Commodore 64. He would like to thank Jeff Johannigman, Stephanie Barrett, and Chris Crawford for their time in the writing of this article.*

## It's Better to Have Loved and Lost...

by JR Sutch

The first sports videogame I owned was published by Electronic Arts. It had no "Madden" in the title. It did not showcase the acronym of a sports league on the cover. It had no online roster update feature, for the roster contained only two players. This game broke the sport down to its most basic of competitive elements, a game of one on one. *One on One: Dr. J vs. Larry Bird* quickly became the most-played game on my Atari 800XL.

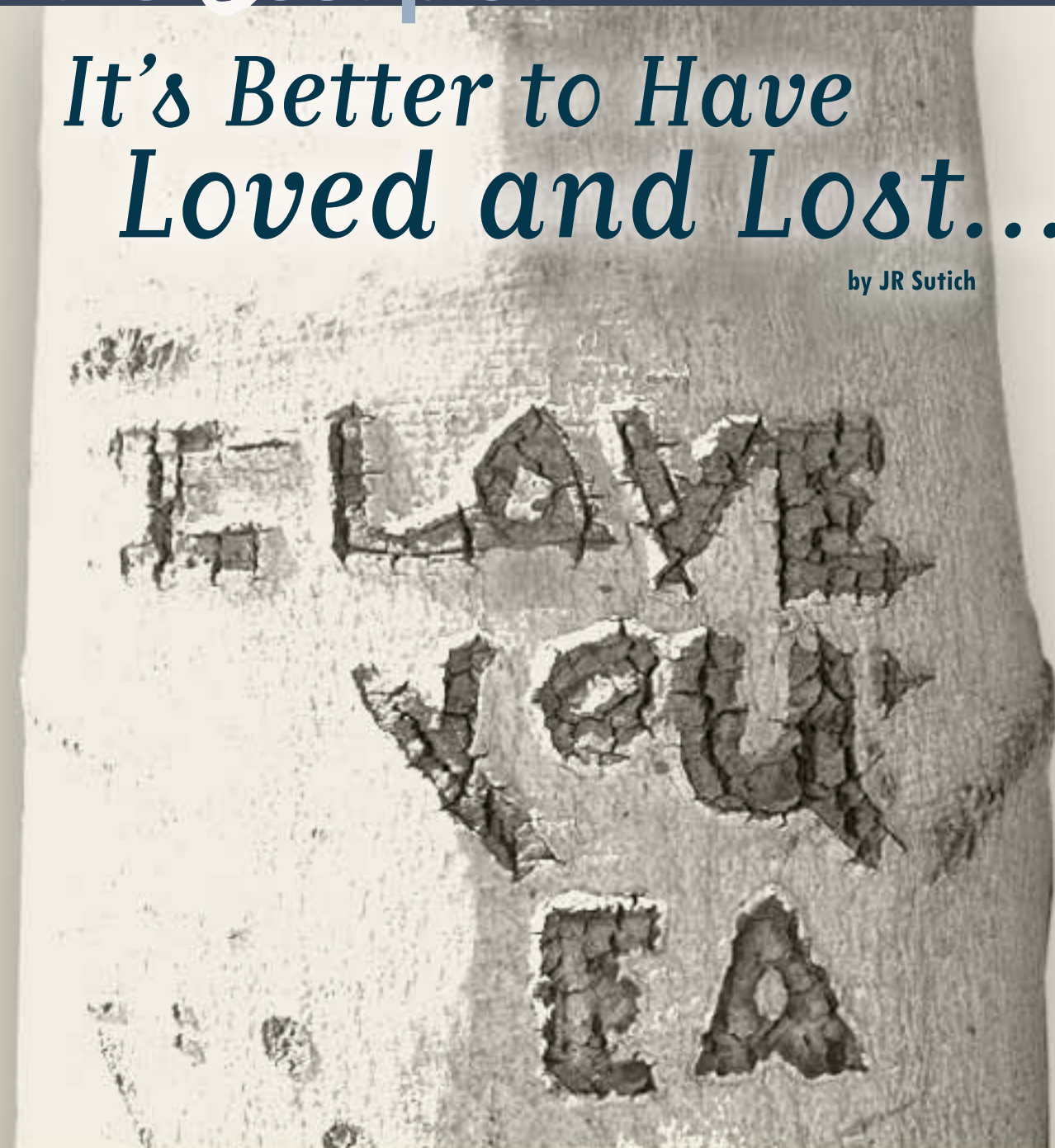
I **loved** this game. My friends **loved** this game. They would ride three miles to my house just to play it. And play it we did, for hours. We mowed lawns to replace worn out joysticks. Eventually, my friends got their own versions and we didn't get together as often, but the talk in study hall was always about who had made the janitor sweep up the shattered backboard the most. It was this game that started my love/hate relationship with EA; this game was where we first met.

After capturing my heart, EA allowed me to compose a song to sing in it, with the release of the *Music Construction Set*. I spent most of my time trying to re-create songs by Huey Lewis or Men at

Work, and the more time that passes, the better I remember my renditions sounding. But, that's what nostalgia is, memory combined with love to produce a feeling of comfort.

Later that year, EA took me on a journey to the New World, to find fortune and fame, and to subjugate the native inhabitants. I don't think that I managed to find all *Seven Cities of Gold*, but it wasn't for lack of searching. But then, in May of 1985, *The Expedition was Lost at Sea!* I had discovered the female of the species. I lost touch with EA over the next few months, seeing as how we didn't really have that much in common anymore. Seems it was more interested in fantasy chess games and solving murders on blimps, and I had my thoughts on what Hard Hat Mack **really** meant.

I bumped into EA again in 1986 at a friend's house, where he showed me *Starflight*, and my life was forever changed. EA had managed to convince me to buy new hardware so that I would be able to play a game. I spent \$3200 on an IBM 8088. My quest for answers to the mysteries of the Crystal Planet and the Ancients was a contributing factor in





my leaving college after only a semester. Turns out, my tuition fund was short by about \$3200. My love had become obsession. How could I have been such a fool? EA, once again, proved that it was the only one for me, and any doubt was erased with the release of *Starflight 2*.

Unfortunately, the world had other plans for us, and I received orders to report for duty on the TCS Tiger's Claw. With the release of Origin's *Wing Commander*, EA found its first true challenge for my attention, and I didn't see jealousy for what it was until it was too late. EA wanted so desperately to be the object of my desire, that it was willing to take those things I now loved and make them its own. At the time, I didn't complain, as I was still able to fly against the Kilrathi. Looking back, I see this as the moment where our relationship started to go sour.

Little things that I would have been willing to overlook before were becoming bigger and bigger issues for us. Some days I still think about the last big break-up we had. EA wanted to move to Trammel, and I wanted to stay in Felucca.

Sadly, I had to let EA go. We just weren't the same beings who met on a nameless half-court, some 17 years earlier. We still saw each other from time to time. But more often than not, any plans to be together would be suddenly cancelled by EA, with usually little or no warning. We had made arrangements to meet again in Britannia, but those never came to pass. I started visiting EA everyday, climbing into the cockpit of a 100-ton Battlemech to make the journey, but sadly it took away my 'Mech. I started to become distrustful. I didn't allow myself to expect EA to follow through with anything, to save myself the disappointment.

I guess I could have done things differently, been a better customer maybe. Perhaps I could have learned to accept EA for who it was, and adapted to its changes. I just wish that it could have been more understanding of my needs, and my wants. I wish it would someday remember how to be that which attracted me in the first place. I will always cherish those early memories we had together, how EA brought my friends and me closer together, and taught me valuable lessons about life, love and loss. Electronic Arts was the first name in the

gaming industry I learned to respect, love, hate, somehow feeling all of those at once. EA helped make me a gamer; EA played a role in shaping me into who I am now.

How do I feel about Electronic Arts today? To understand my answer, you would have to think back to your first love. Not your first crush or your first kiss, but the first time you ever wanted to be with someone forever, and to have that person never change. Now imagine that almost 25 years have passed, and you are two totally different people. You still care about that person, and you still value her for her contributions to your life over the years.

I still love Electronic Arts. But, I am no longer **in love** with Electronic Arts. Does that make any sense?

If not, let me tell you about the time I left Sony Online Entertainment standing at the altar. 🤖

*JR Sutich is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist magazine and is rumored to have been banned from an online game during its initial design stage.*

*I still love Electronic Arts. But, I am no longer in love with Electronic Arts. Does that make any sense?*





# Unrisky Business

by Mark Wallace

The lush countryside is bathed in golden light. Horses' hooves **fwhump** solidly into the turf. Pistol shots are sharp, commanding. The period detail is unbelievable. The main characters have been acted well (with one or two exceptions), and extras wander everywhere you look. You really do have the sense of being in a 19th-century town on the frontier of the American West, where morals and ethics are dictated by who controls the land, and control is wrested through the merciless application of hot lead. The idealist fights for his notions of justice, the rancher fights for his livelihood, both fight to win the affections of the alluring madame of the local brothel - the realist, as usual - who is happy enough to have the attention. The characters are, on the whole, well drawn. The plot, such as there is, is engaging. The biggest release of the year, it bogs down in places, but there are hours more content here than usual.

The rise of the Western game? A new MMOG in hush-hush development at EA? Neversoft and Activision's open-world shooter, *Gun*?

In fact, it's none of the above. It's the 1980 epic film *Heaven's Gate* by director Michael Cimino. It won't be coming to an Xbox360 near you anytime soon, but it just may hold important lessons for the future of the gaming industry.



## ...as much as we'd prefer it were otherwise, it's money that determines whether the games we play are mind-blowing pieces of interactive art...

*Heaven's Gate* is a gorgeous film. It's a bit too long and a bit too self-indulgent (it clocked in at three and a half hours when originally released), but the lessons it holds have little to do with art, storyline or gameplay. The lessons it holds have to do with money, where it comes from and how to get it. And as much as we'd prefer it were otherwise, it's money that determines whether the games we play are mind-blowing pieces of interactive art or mind-numbing sequels in yet another licensed franchise.

Where money in the games industry is concerned, of course, there's no better place to find it than at Electronic Arts, Inc., the industry's behemoth. EA took in almost \$3 billion in revenue in its 2004 fiscal year, and is looking to grab about 10 percent more than that in 2005, about what eBay takes every year. While it stumbles now and then (as it is doing, slightly, now), EA has gone from a ballyhooed upstart when Trip Hawkins

founded it in 1982 to the biggest, richest company on the face of the planet devoted exclusively to bringing people semiconductor-based fun.

But its size doesn't necessarily mean EA is the best. Riches are not the mother of invention. Gamers are often surprised when riches and invention walk hand in hand, and don't often expect it from a cash-heavy company like EA. Except by those loyal *Madden NFL* fans, EA gets slapped around and spat on for being the evil empire of game development on a daily basis. You name the name, EA has been called it. Profit-hungry. Power-mad. Uncaring, uncreative and uncouth, not to mention unethical and even underhanded.

The company definitely has its faults, where its products are concerned (as well as in other areas, as ea\_spouse can tell you). Licenses are not the sole ingredient of good games. Just because

you have *Batman*, *James Bond*, *Harry Potter*, *Marvel Comics*, the *Lord of the Rings*, *The Godfather* and pretty much every major sports franchise on the face of the planet - from the NHL to the NFL, NCAA football **and** basketball, golf stars, NASCAR, FIFA soccer, the NBA and even a non-sport sport like Arena Football - doesn't mean your games are engaging and fun.

It doesn't mean that all of them are yawners, of course. **Madden NFL 2005** is one of the best-loved sports games around. From its humble beginnings with games like *Archon* and *Pinball Construction Set*, EA has since shepherded great games like *Battlefield 1942* and *Battlefield 2*, *Need for Speed* and the most popular computer game of all time, *The Sims* (even if the company at first supported it only reluctantly). It

## You name the name, EA has been called it.

has also kept the MMOG *Ultima Online* going long past the point most people expected, and has occasionally taken on

slightly unusual projects like *Black & White* and *TimeSplitters*. Not all of these have been smashing successes, but most were fun and even, inventive.

But the fact remains that while EA may, from time to time, produce the sleeper gem like *Black & White*, its apparent goal is to hit on the secret alchemical formula, the unfailing recipe that will enable it to turn brain-sweat and database tears into gold every time. Blockbuster after blockbuster, bringing EA yet more scads of cash, enabling the company to either fund a few more of those innovative little games or just look the other way entirely, thumb the Hit Stick and flatten the competition.

It's a lot like a big movie studio, in that sense. Or anyway, a big movie studio of 25 years ago - around the time *Heaven's Gate* was released.

I hear someone groaning in the back of the lecture hall. Fear not. I'm not about to tell you games are as important as movies and should be accorded the same due (though that's true, at this point, more or less). Games get compared to movies all the time - they're as popular as movies, we're told, they're as



# the escapist

engaging as movies (or more, in many cases), they may or may not represent the next step in narrative entertainment, and some feel they offer better value for the buck. But what's often glossed over in these comparisons, however accurate or inaccurate they may be, are the parallels between the industries themselves, not at the level of design and development, which is usually what interests gamers (and where there are indeed striking similarities), but at the level of money and decision-making power.

The two industries haven't evolved exactly in parallel, but it's worth looking at what's happened in Hollywood to get a sense of where EA fits into what's happening in gaming. Because the truth is, we may not have as much to fear from EA as we think.

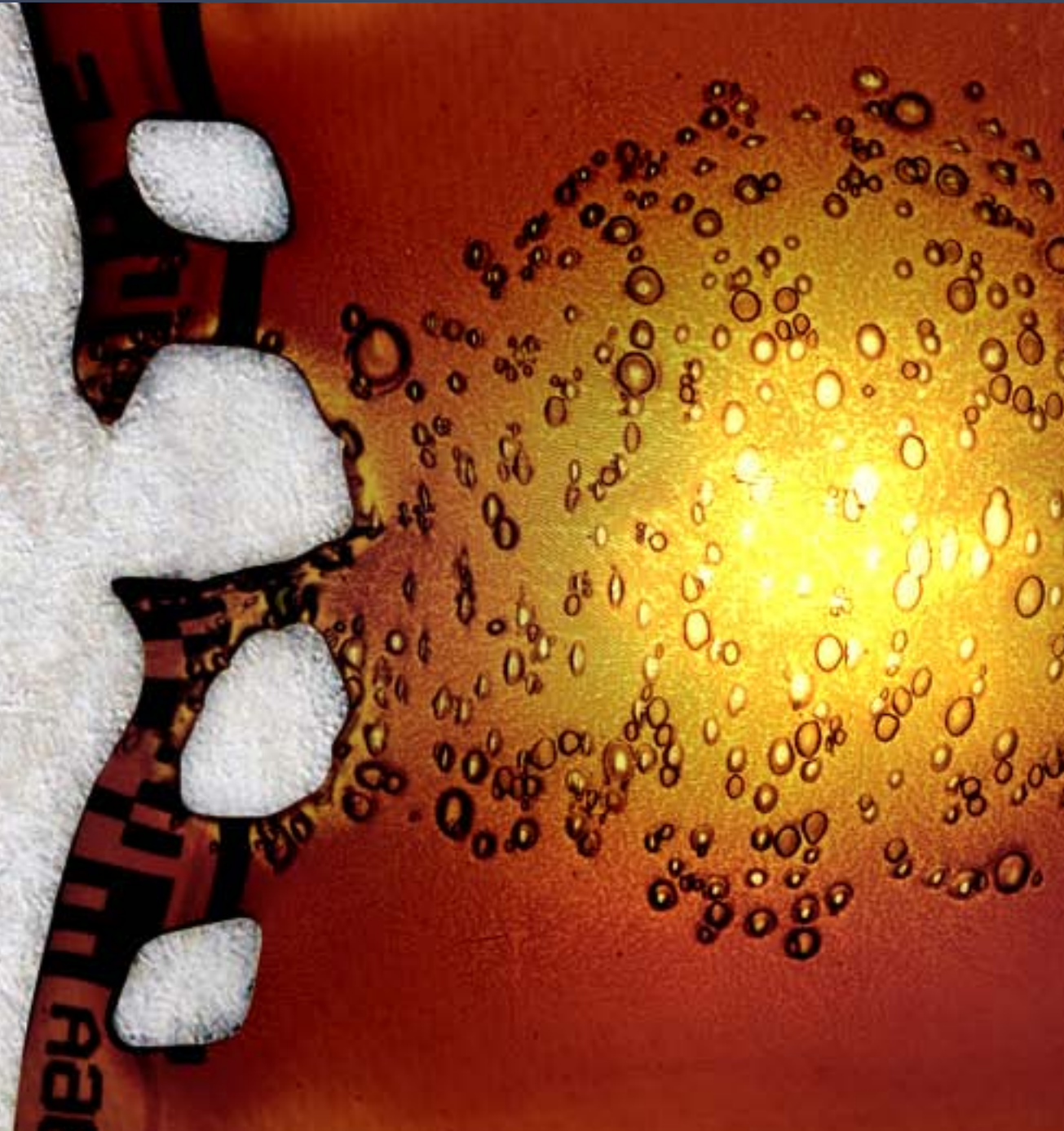
Unlike the gaming industry, the movies were controlled by cigar-chomping moguls from the beginning. Warsaw native Schmuel Gelbfisz got his start in the garment business in New York before going on - as Samuel Goldwyn - to found the company that would later become Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, aka MGM. Early on, someone got the idea that movies

were glamorous. People wanted to be a part of the industry not just because they loved movies, but because some of the glamor of the movies rubbed off on anyone who was involved.

The moguls held on for decades, producing movies, good and bad. Some, like Irving Thalberg, were movie men from the beginning. Others, like Goldwyn and Harry Cohn, who was a pool shark and streetcar conductor before founding Columbia Pictures, got their start in very different businesses.

The end of the movie moguls is commonly dated to 1963, with the Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton epic, *Cleopatra*. Beginning with a \$2 million budget, the production eventually ended nearly \$50 million later, and three years behind schedule.

*Cleopatra* ended the age of epics, but it was only a matter of time before they were back. Before that could happen, though, the 1970s saw the rise of deep, personal, character-driven movies that were emphatically the embodiment of a director's vision, rather than a producer's desire for dance numbers and expensive costumes. The Best Picture Oscar





**Once you have as much money as EA, you protect your cash by not taking any risks.**



**There's not much incentive for EA to innovate.**

winners of the decade, every one of them, are among the best pictures ever made (in this reviewer's opinion): *Patton*, *The French Connection*, *The Godfather*, *The Sting*, *The Godfather Part II*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Rocky*, *Annie Hall*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Even the losers were great: *M\*A\*S\*H*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Deliverance*, *Chinatown*, *Jaws*, *Taxi Driver*, *Star Wars*, *Dog Day Afternoon* and many more.

It was *The Deer Hunter* that turned out to be the problem. It was *The Deer Hunter* - directed by Michael Cimino - that convinced United Artists, and Cimino himself, that the new age of the epic was at hand. All you had to do was give a great director unbridled control over their films - as the producers of earlier years had had over theirs - and you could spin celluloid into gold.


But like *Cleopatra*, *Heaven's Gate* turned out to be a bloated and expensive failure. It bankrupted United Artists and effectively ended Cimino's career.

It also ended the era of the filmmaker's film. *Heaven's Gate* was the final over-extension of '70s auteur culture, and

ushered in the blockbuster mentality of the 1980s and '90s. To protect themselves from directors, the studios wanted big-ticket productions again, easy stories, bright special effects. Was *Rain Man* really the best picture of 1988? Actually, it might have been. *Die Hard* was released that year. *The Terminator* had already come out, and *Terminator 2* was well on its way. By 1997, the best picture was *Titanic*, and the decade wound up with Jar Jar Binks annoying moviegoers the world over. I'm a big fan of *Die Hard*, but for character and storyline the '70s directors' pictures are where it's at. In the '80s and '90s, the money was making decisions again, chasing more money, at the expense of - you guessed it - innovation and inventiveness.

You see where I'm going with this. It's not such a new thesis: Once you have money, you want to protect it. Once you have as much money as EA, you protect your cash by not taking any risks. There's not much incentive for EA to innovate. They could probably churn out sports franchises for the rest of Larry Probst's days and do just fine.





**Whether the mini-mogul made his money back or not didn't really matter; the movies were cool again, and his cash bought him entree to that world.**

That doesn't mean that good games are dead, though. With the movies, a funny thing happened on the way to the blockbuster, and if gamers are lucky and America is ready for it, the same thing could happen with games.

What happened was the birth of independent film. In the shadow of Hollywood's blockbuster mentality, independent producers started throwing money at young directors, giving rise to a new round of thoughtful, non-blockbuster films put together with little more than a script, a camera and a couple of actors and people to work as production assistants. Filmmakers like Todd Solondz, Wes Anderson, and Kevin Smith were guys you could meet on the street in New York and chat with over drinks with friends (if you had the right friends). You got the sense they weren't chasing fame primarily, they were chasing their art - though no one chases art without the thought of renown being close behind.

The people who were dead set on the glamour were the money men. There have always been independent Hollywood producers, but the 90s saw the rebirth of the non-Hollywood

producer, of the **schmatte** king looking for a little burnish through what was suddenly the hottest entertainment medium of the day. If you were talented, charming, ambitious and willing to socialize as though your career depended on it (which it did), you could often convince one of the many bored businessmen, flush from the boom, to invest a million or two in your little jewel of a movie. Whether the mini-mogul made his money back or not didn't really matter; the movies were cool again, and his cash bought him entree to that world.

If gamers are lucky, the same thing will happen for games. The talent is already there. There are plenty of interesting games out there now, plenty of innovation, plenty of inventive designers. You won't find most of them at your local GameStop, though, because big developers and publishers can't afford to take the risk. They're too busy protecting their money by hunting up the next blockbuster game.

What gaming needs is more brave money. It needs cash that's willing to go outside the system and fund developers who are independent in the sense that



## ...the game that makes gaming as cool as the movies were 10 years ago is probably going to come from a company like EA...

the '90s indie filmmakers were: small groups of talented individuals working together on the cheap to create their version of art. That talent exists, and I'd wager that money isn't far behind.

But first, gaming needs to become cool - and I'm sorry to say that it just isn't yet. Gaming is cool if you're a gamer, sure. But to most Americans, even to many who own a console, gaming is still a curious, new thing. It doesn't yet have the cachet of the movies. Tourists don't descend on Austin to visit the gaming Walk of Stars. Even famous novelists get more play than famous game designers. Marvin Mogul may be aware that games do as much business as Hollywood movies do box office sales, but he doesn't realize that for no more than it cost him to fund an independent film, and often for much less, he could fund a new game that stands to make him just as much money.

Even if he did realize that, what he can't yet get out of gaming is glamour. But in about five minutes, that's going to change. It might be the huge success of *Spore*, it might be the dismal failure of *The Godfather*. It might be some game EA hasn't yet sunk its teeth into, or one that comes from somewhere else entirely (*World of Warcraft*, anyone?). But it's going to happen, and the game that makes gaming as cool as the movies were 10 years ago is probably going to come from a company like EA, a company with the money and the reach to market the hell out of a product, to get it in front of everyone in the country - not just gamers - to draw people's attention to games as just another fixture of the entertainment universe.

Whether the game itself succeeds or fails is almost unimportant. What counts is that it will open a new door for the developers and designers who have to content themselves with making browser-based games and freeware

today. They'll still get their start making small games, but now they'll be able to get them in front of the public. And gradually, being an indie gamedev will come to mean something very cool, not just to gamers, but to everyone.

We're still a few short steps away from that time, though, so wish EA luck. Whether it's a *Cleopatra*, a *Heaven's Gate* or a *Jaws* (one of the first modern blockbuster successes), one day soon, a big game is going to make a big splash and end the age of the gaming mogul. And once again, the guy with the best game will win. ☐

*Mark Wallace is a journalist and editor residing in Brooklyn, New York, and at Walkering.com. He has written on gaming and other subjects for The New York Times, The New Yorker, Details and many other publications.*





## NEWS BITS

### EA Settles on Artist Overtime Suit

EA settled out of court on an overtime lawsuit October 5, awarding members of the class action a total of \$15.6 million. The terms of the settlement changed the status of entry-level artists to an hourly position, rather than salaried. They will no longer be eligible for stock options or bonuses.

There hasn't been any word on the similar suit filed by software engineers earlier this year.

### Madden PSP Owners Challenge Everything, Including EA

The PSP version of *Madden 06* has more than a few kinks to work out. Not only will the game lock up at times, but the kick meter randomly disappears during plays. Franchise is also on the fritz, and EA's official workaround hasn't lived up to expectations.

A disgruntled fan has created a site called Recall Madden in an attempt to provide an information source for other owners of the game. The site contains links to EA's responses to problems thus far, and also has phone numbers disgruntled players can call for assistance.

### Schwarzenegger Signs Gaming Bill

Arnold Schwarzenegger signed into law a bill that called for legislating the sale of violent and sexually explicit games to minors on Friday. It was unclear as to whether or not Schwarzenegger would veto the bill, as much of the gaming industry is based in California, but he ultimately sided with the wishes of the state Senate.

# Casual Friday

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# Code Union, Code Better

by Joe Blancato

"It was only because he was so numb and beaten himself that Jurgis did not worry more about this. But he never thought of it, except when he was dragged to it - he lived like a dumb beast of burden, knowing only the moment in which he was."

- Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

"The love of my life comes home late at night complaining of a headache that will not go away and a chronically upset stomach, and my happy supportive smile is running out."

- "ea\_spouse," *EA: The Human Story*

Powerful words from two very insightful people. Ninety-nine years ago, Upton Sinclair wrote about ill-treated immigrant meatpacking industry workers unable to stand up for themselves. Heinous injuries went unreported; workers were expected to tally long, grueling hours of work. Management viewed them as replaceable cogs in a machine with an endless supply of workers - there were always more poor eastern Europeans who couldn't speak English to grind sausage.



# the escapist

One year ago, an anonymous writer known only as “ea\_spouse” wrote about ill-treated game designers unable to stand up for themselves. They were expected to tally long, grueling hours of work; illness and injuries caused by fatigue went ignored and unreported. Management viewed them as replaceable cogs in a machine with an endless supply of workers - there were always more young college graduates unaware of the term “unconscionable contract” to code the next version of *Madden*. And once they are burned out from months, even years, of overtime, their jobs may be outsourced to even more willing people in India.

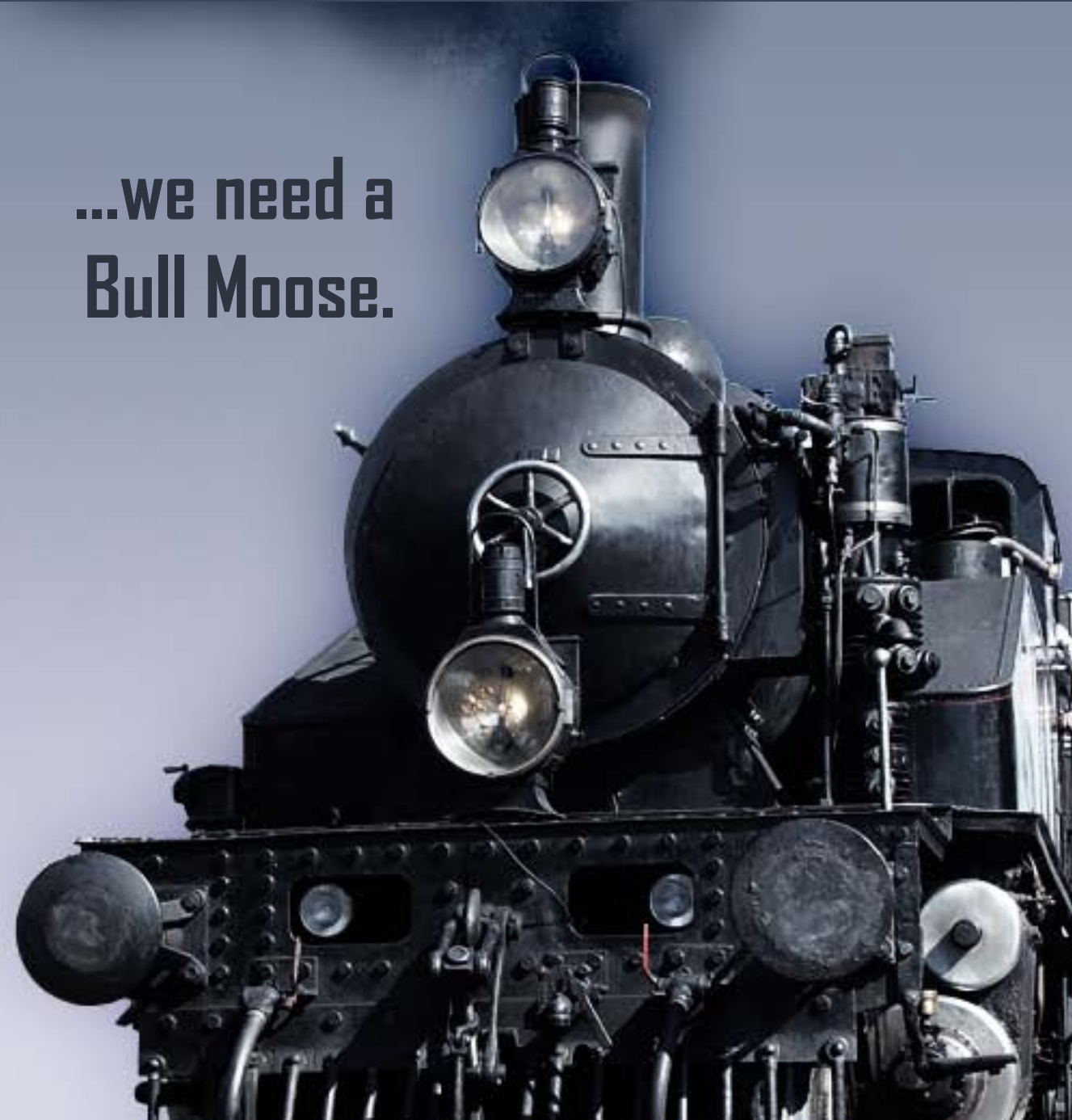
If we continue at the rate we’re going, we’re either going to be worrying about a bunch of college-aged kids with computer science degrees working at McDonald’s, too disillusioned to continue in their chosen field or worse, the position they previously held was moved overseas to a more bottom line-friendly locale. For the sake of trying to save money on production costs, why not ship off art production to Romania? Or customer service to India? But to paraphrase the old cliché: First they came for the artists, and I said nothing...

No, we need to slow this train down before the American car is decoupled from the engine and we’re left to glide to the slow halt of economic slumber forever. But how do we do it? The locomotive is out of the station, and the engineer has dismantled the brakes in an effort to save on fuel costs. Quite simply, we need a Bull Moose.

In May of 1902, 100,000 coal miners in eastern Pennsylvania caused enough trouble to change the way the United States viewed labor forever. 100,000 men left their posts at anthracite coal mines and refused to reenter until they were guaranteed safer working conditions, a pay raise and formal recognition of their union by operators. Executives lording over the mines refused to budge, ultimately believing empty bellies would break the workers’ resolve and get them back to work.

Fast forward five months. The strike is still raging on, the mine isn’t operational and schools in the Northeast are closing because they don’t have the coal necessary to keep their students warm. President Teddy Roosevelt summons both sides of the strike to Washington, and threatens to mobilize the Army to

...we need a  
Bull Moose.





operate the mines on the fed's bill if the union and owners don't agree to enter into arbitration. Less than a month later, the miners are back to work, boasting a 10 percent pay raise and a reduction of hours in their work week.

A high school history lesson easily forgotten in today's political climate. A president skillfully and forcefully saved lives and made an industry a better place to work through sheer political will. That just can't happen with the type of people we elect to office; we like our politicians bland, inoffensive, and capable of doubletalk and backpedaling. The president threatening industry with the force of the Army would either get him impeached or shot in the head by the people who put him in office.

But in fairness to administrations current and past, when Teddy was around, America was a very different place. We weren't yet a Beacon of Light Standing on a Hill for other cultures to gaze upon in awe. We were the new kid on the block, trying out something called Rugged Individualism, figuring out exactly who we were and what our place in the world was. Europe was a boat ride away; we'd just secured the West and

were stretching our arms. Strong decisions were made by strong people.

Unfortunately, that time has long since past. We're the fattest kid on a block that's shrinking every day due to the Information Age. Our American Dream has changed from a house with a white picket fence to a wild goose chase of consumerism and faux-Roman decadence. We're forever in search of more toys, more cars, more women, more money. And certain members of a certain socioeconomic class are convinced the best way to achieve that dream is to sacrifice those below them in the name of unfettered capitalism.

As the Baby Echo generation enters a job market still choked by their parents and in some cases, their grandparents, we continue to force the price of skilled labor into the ground. Coming close to their parents' salaries isn't something people dare to dream anymore; an American generation is doing worse than the one before it.

It might seem that the only way to protect our Way of Life is to force industry to start paying fair wages for fair work globally. But, the global option



just isn't going to happen; the world at large is far too maligned to our political bent to expect everyone to agree to a world-wide solution. We need to think domestically before we can spread such a grand dream to others. We're left with making American companies color inside the lines.

But how? We can't wait for legislation to prevent this; the **president** and his party believe devaluing skilled labor (or shipping it away - ultimately the same end) is a good idea. We have to give legislators from both sides of the political spectrum a reason to shift their weight behind the American software worker - we need a whole boatload of us to leverage some lobbying power on a few big names in Congress. If we don't, we need to prepare ourselves for the reality that the Good Ship American Software Industry will pull a Titanic - and we're not first class passengers. The best way to do this is also the most controversial, something so stigmatized by "big business" (prepare your tinfoil hats) that among most young, educated, white-collar workers, it's a four-letter word. The software industry needs to unionize.

There, I said it. I'll wash my mouth out with soap later. But think about it. It worked last time. Since Samuel Gompers led the American Federation of Labor in the late 1800s until the late 1960s, unions worked with (and against) large businesses to ensure skilled workers received fair wages, compensation for injuries and retained the 40 hour work week.

This is not to say they're perfect; some large unions are known to be hideously corrupt and have been the target of numerous anti-trust suits. But the same can be said for large companies, as well. Any large organization that grows unchecked will eventually grow too powerful for its own good. This is why a delicate balance between an organized union and top brass is what the software industry desperately needs.

It's not anyone's fault, really. Video game design began as a frontier science. Teenage kids roamed like Kerouac, hawking video games in baggies and boxing their own releases a decade after they made their first million. The early years of the industry were a Hemingway novel set in a nouveau Old West. You got by on talent, hard work and grit. Teddy

## The software industry needs to unionize.

Roosevelt's spirit kicked a horse into a gallop here, and gaming exploded into a gold rush, where ultimately the only people making money were the shysters selling mining equipment.

But the time for Rugged Individualism in gaming has passed. Winging it from company to company only means you'll end up working progressively longer hours for progressively less pay. Unless



## In ea\_spouse, we had our Upton Sinclair, but we're without a Teddy Roosevelt.


workers organize, the gaming industry is going to end up like textiles or meatpacking - shipped overseas or so rife with managerial corruption and lobbying, we'll all be making minimum wage until we're replaced for younger people capable of working longer hours. And it's already starting. Just ask ea\_spouse. And in her rallying cry, we know where it all has to start.

Is our industry really so heavenly we don't need the comfortable assurance of tenure and normal work hours? Any victim of outsourcing or frequent "crunch time" is crazy to think so. No, things have swung in the direction of upper management, to the point where workers are forced to accept low pay and long hours out of fear, and it's time to bring the equilibrium back to balance. It's time to make Electronic Arts a union shop.

EA employs 2,500 people inside the U.S. They boast that none of their employees are "represented by a union, guild or other collective bargaining association." But really, why aren't they? Throughout the country, all kinds of skilled workers are part of "collective bargaining associations," be it aircraft control tower operators or automobile assembly line workers. In certain parts of the country, grocery store chains are union shops. Ever wonder why the cute old woman who's been ringing up your TV dinners and beer has been there for 15 years? It's because she can afford to be.

In ea\_spouse, we had our Upton Sinclair, but we're without a Teddy Roosevelt. Without a friend in politics, we're a massive blob with no direction, no drive. Someone is going to have to step up from within to give us a figurehead. The industry is in the middle of a rockstar

drought, but we need someone like the industry's founding fathers, able to capture our hearts and minds, not only with a game, but with a personality and a cause. But with corporate cultures disintegrating as bottom lines and mergers usurp artistic vision, rockstars are getting harder and harder to come by.

Pray for one to rise from the bowels of some dungeon-like cube farm. We need a savior-caliber leader to keep us together, and to keep us employed. 

*Joe Blancato is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist Magazine, in addition to being the Founder of [waterthread.org](http://waterthread.org).*



## EA Sports: Is Classic Better?

by Dana Massey

NHL Hall of Fame goaltender and current member of the Canadian Parliament Ken Dryden once said that the golden age of any sport is when you are twelve years old. And so it was for me, in 1992 on my SEGA Genesis with EA's *NHL Hockey*. In that golden age, I learned the lessons that would help me defy my parents' constant insistence that "staying inside and playing games will get you nowhere." Eventually making a career out of it, this was my education. I played games of all genres and all types, but nothing excited me like a new EA Sports release.

Over the years, others have attempted to assail EA Sports' mountain perch. Recently, one company - Take Two Interactive - gained a foothold with their 2K line of sports titles. EA Sports responded with its nuclear deterrent: exclusivity. Suddenly, EA ceased to be a chosen favorite, and instead became a monopoly. For the NFL, NCAA Football and NASCAR, EA's lawyers ensured what their game designers no longer could: market supremacy. Take-Two responded by securing the MLBPA license, effectively spelling an end to EA's Major League Baseball series. This back and forth has inspired harsh feelings from fans of each sport, and created a kind of hysteria in the communities for non-exclusive sports, most notably the NBA and NHL. Conventional wisdom says that competition breeds success and innovation. Thus, a market without competition leads to stagnation and complacency. Within the 2006 line of games, the world got its first taste of several exclusive franchises.



# the escapist

Despite the cries of those who feared monopoly, EA remains good at what they do. At no point was this more apparent than E3 2005. A group of die-hard gamers and I met in one of the many Los Angeles pizza haunts to discuss our best games of the show. When the topic of sports titles came up, EA remained king. In one particularly memorable moment, while simultaneously cursing EA for its tactics, *Madden NFL '06* was nominated for - and eventually co-won - best sports title, venom notwithstanding.

Similarly, EA's NHL offering, in my opinion, regained a position of prominence - a crown they had lost for a few years to Take-Two - with *NHL '06*. The latest title breaks out of a long slump arguably stretching back to last century and produces a fun, challenging and less exploitable representation of NHL hockey. At some points in history, the hockey titles were more popular than the league upon which they were based, but over the last several installments, this iconic status eroded. Making matters worse, earlier this year a temporary art gaffe on EA's official NHL website led media and fans to believe EA was about to ink another exclusivity deal. Hot on the heels of a mediocre 2005 version,

one that was soundly beaten by Take-Two's hockey offering, the community was furious. Luckily for fans of the rival franchise, this was a mistake on EA's part, and no such deal exists.

The recent struggles and glimmers of resurgence with *NHL '06* have been close to my heart. As a fan of the series, I have owned and played every single incarnation of this series. I began in 1992 on the SEGA Genesis and ultimately switched to the PC for the 1997 release. Over that period, I've seen the series evolve from a 2-D, top-down game played on blue ice, to a fully 3-D game with eerily life-like players and full franchise modes built in. Yet for me, it goes back to the words of Ken Dryden. Has the series truly been stuck in mediocrity, or did I simply enjoy the game that I discovered more than those that followed?

EA put Dryden's theory to the test this year. *NHL '06* for the PlayStation 2 comes with *NHL 1994* - to many, the crown jewel of the franchise - built in. This trip down memory lane excited many, but ultimately reminded me what I long suspected to be true. The games from your youth may be your favorites,

but they are often best left in your youth. *NHL 1994* is still an exciting title, but it also shows just how far technology and gaming have come over the last decade.

The flaw with the NHL line of games is not a lack of innovation. Rather, they often tried too hard to do new things as a result of their corporate insistence on putting out a new game every year. *NHL 2005* is a prime example of this. Fundamental gameplay changes made skating and momentum a hassle; this new "feature" frustrated me, along with many long time fans, to the point of practically skipping a year.

This year, the game follows the traditional formula, with just updated rosters and graphics, and the re-introduction of a few key features, such as "create a player." As a result, *NHL 2006* has met with more critical praise. There are only so many new things to be done with the simulation of a sport. For me, it is better to simply update what you can, and then hone the AI and experience itself rather than doing something new - and quite probably annoying - for the sake of it.





# the Escapist

As I am often a critic of the lack of innovation in gaming, the above is a tough argument for me to make. However, in this case, it is necessary. Take the example of soft drinks. Coke and Pepsi often produce alternative flavors in an attempt to trump the other. While they have a wide range of success, the core product of Coke or Pepsi remains the same. When Coke attempted a wholesale change to their taste with New Coke, it was met with mass rejection. EA Sports needs to look to this example. Fans have expectations for an EA Sports game, no matter what the sport, when they pick up the latest installment. To fiddle with the core of the game simply to justify a new version is counterproductive. Sometimes change is necessary, such as the transition to 3-D, but at its core, the game experience needs to remain comparable. To me, this is where EA got into trouble in the early part of this century.

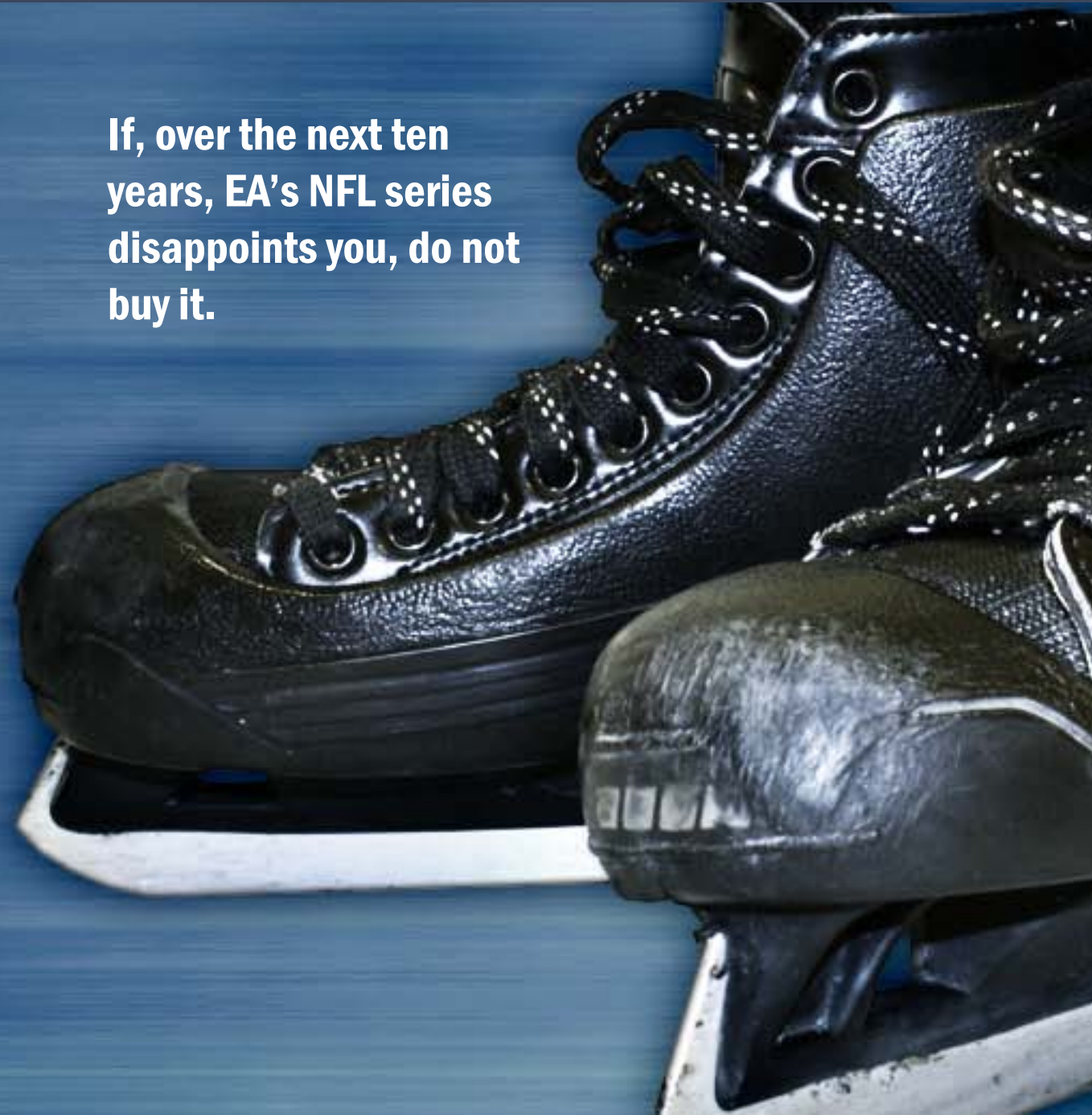
How will the lucrative sports gaming wars play out? It is tough to tell, but some say it's ultimately in the hands of fans, not EA. If, over the next ten years, EA's NFL series disappoints you, do not buy it. Only through a vote with your pocketbooks will the NFL be able to

evaluate whether or not exclusivity is good for their sport's gaming franchise. I firmly believe the outcry of the NFL community played a huge role in EA's failure to secure NHL and NBA licenses. Neither league is blind and quite probably considered what had happened with the NFL when the subject was brought up.

At the same time, it is my fervent hope that the control of the big licenses in some sports will mean that a genre long set in its path will once again begin to evolve in new directions. I sorely miss games like *Mutant League Football*. While I hope that the official EA games remain true to their roots as a good arcade-simulation of the sports they cover, the lack of "official license" leaves the door wide open for other companies to make innovations in gameplay and fun-factor. That is a sentiment that should appeal to sports gamers everywhere. 📺

*Dana "Lepidus" Massey is the Lead Content Editor for MMORPG.com and former Co-Lead Game Designer for Wish.*

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## MEET THE TEAM

Each week we ask a question of our staff and featured writers to learn a little bit about them and gain some insight into where they are coming from. This week's question is:

**“Electronic Arts advises us to ‘Challenge Everything.’ What is one of the most difficult accomplishments you have achieved?”**

**Allen Varney, “The Conquest of Origin”**

In fall 2003, I designed and ran a large-scale “serious game,” a three-day business ethics simulation for 100+ second-year MBA students at the University of Texas McCombs Business School. It was hard enough creating the Executive Challenge, but in some ways it proved a bigger challenge to get MBA students to embrace the idea of “ethics”...

**Jason Smith, “Setting the Stage,” IT Director**

Once, in the space of two weeks, I packed up everything I owned and quit a stable job to move across the country and join a startup. Sure, there's been other tough projects and accomplishments I'm proud of, but I think taking that measure of risk and change at once was probably the most difficult. I also finished Final Fantasy X in a single play session, which I haven't yet decided if it's something I should be proud of.

**Joe Blancato, “Code Union, Code Better,” Contributing Editor**

Let's see. I was part of a small group of people who managed to create a popular web magazine that people respect and read every week. That was pretty cool, yeah.

**JR Sutich, “It's Better to Have Loved and Lost,” Contributing Editor**

Surviving 13 weeks of Hell that is Marine Corps Boot Camp. I don't think I have ever been pushed as hard mentally or physically as I was during that time. Although, GDC 2004 came close, just ask my friend, 'Half-Elvis.'

**Julianne Greer, Executive Editor**

When I was five, I was diagnosed with Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia. Two and a half years of weekly chemotherapy later, I was cured. Since then, most everything else has been cake.

